

# Major Causes of the Rapid Longevity Extension in Postwar Japan

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The length of life increased substantially in economically developed countries during the twentieth century, and has so far been rising further in this century. The longevity extension was particularly fast in Japan after the Second World War. This paper discusses factors that might have made the longevity extension in Japan faster than those in many other developed countries. Those factors include rapid economic growth, overlapping epidemiological transitions, dietary patterns, traditional health culture, genetic factors (including ApoE4 allele frequency), and egalitarian distribution of income and wealth.

Special attention is given to relationships between social stratification and health. Review of relevant literature suggests that socioeconomic differentials in mortality and health are relatively weak, inconsistent and anomalous in Japan. It is hypothesized that the cultural homogeneity and active vertical communication in the Japanese society lessen socioeconomic differences in acquisition of health-related information, adoption of health-related recommendations, and utilization of medical services. This "health homogeneity" makes it easier and faster for impacts of health-related innovations and developments to spread widely in different social classes and be reflected in demographic measures of mortality such as the life expectancy at birth.